Land...

Betty Jo Temple*

*Iowa State College

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Abstract

MA W, do you want a drink?" Minnie looked up at the small boy. She rose to her feet, straightened her back slowly and rubbed a limp hand across her sweating forehead. Dipping the cup into the brownish water, she sipped the warm liquid. Her eyes wandered down the row of rust-colored broomcorn and rested upon the bent shoulders of a lean, gaunt man...
“Maw, do you want a drink?” Minnie looked up at the small boy. She rose to her feet, straightened her back slowly and rubbed a limp hand across her sweating forehead. Dipping the cup into the brownish water, she sipped the warm liquid. Her eyes wandered down the row of rust-colored broomcorn and rested upon the bent shoulders of a lean, gaunt man. Her lips tightened. The cup suddenly splashed into the pail of water.

“Are ya all right?”

She looked down in startled amazement at the small figure of her son. Ruffing his crisp, springy, black curls, she pulled her sunbaked mouth back from her teeth in a tiredish smile.

“No, I’m fine. Now go take a drink to yer paw.” As the little boy turned with the heavy pail a sudden thought crossed her mind. “Owen, are the babies all right in the wagon?”

He turned and looked at her with big, solemn, black eyes. She felt a sudden tug at her throat. He was such a baby. He should be running and playing instead of dragging a heavy pail of water down endless rows of broomcorn. Broomcorn that stretched far above his five-year-old head. Her eyes grew dark with held-back pain. He had to help pay for his food. It wasn’t easy to make things meet in this wild, new country. She listened, half-hearing what he was saying.

“Arvid’s takin’ real good care of Theron.”
Her lips pressed together. Yes, my three-year-old is taking care of his eight-months-old baby brother. "A coyote could grab 'em and I'd never know it," she said half aloud. She glanced down at Owen. He was standing still, muscles hunched and eyes straining to see down the long row of broomcorn.

"Owen, the coyotes won't hurt ya. They're scared of folks." She touched his shoulder gently and drew him close to her side. "Ya'd better take a drink to the others. Like as not they're drier than this here dirt."

Minnie turned back to the broomcorn. Sometimes it looked like a tall mountain, and she felt that she'd never be out of the small room bound by the rust of the broomcorn, with a ceiling of bright, blue sky. Starting, she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. Looking up into the gentle face of her husband, she drew back from him. He ain't man enough to earn a living for us, she told herself dully.

"Minnie, ya oughtn't to work sa hard."

"Gotta eat, ain't we?" she answered shortly and turned back to her choppy pulling of the slender stocks. Her arms felt weighed down as if they were made of lead.

"It ain't right, Minnie. Ya oughtn't be working 'cause it might hurt the young 'un."

"Ya let me worry about that." Minnie's eyes blinked back repressed tears, her young face drawn with a look of heavy fatigue. Pulling broomcorn, having babies—Her eyes hardened.

"Go back to work. We gotta have ever' cent we can make." She watched his sunburned, gaunt face fall into lines of tired dullness. His shoulders sagged as he walked away from her.

The day dragged endlessly on. The pain in her back deepened to a dull ache. Her arms mechanically grasped the armful of corn and pulled it out of the hard, sandy earth. Each armful came out with bits of the soil clinging to it. Her mind raced on ahead to the evening. If only they could grow some vegetables for the babies to eat. She grasped another armful of broomcorn. Not even any milk to be had! Why didn't we stay in Missouri? She slumped back on her haunches, resting her numb shoulders and arms. Pushing back heavy hair from her forehead, she tucked the loose strands up under the sunbonnet she wore. Her arms once more reached out. "Indian Territory—the land of opportunity! Enter Cherokee Strip run, and stake out a homestead."
Live on it a year and the 160 acres are yours!" They didn't say that there was no food—no towns—no buildings—no rain. Sobs seemed to well up from her toes and fought for freedom from her heavy, cumbersome body.

"Minnie, it's gettin' dark. Time to quit."

She raised dull eyes and looked at her husband. Why'd I ever let him talk me into coming out here? She rose heavily, her stiff knees almost giving way beneath her.

They walked silently, side by side, back to their wagon.

Minnie climbed awkwardly up. Glancing back in the bed of the wagon, she satisfied herself that the three sleeping boys were all right. She turned to her husband.

"Walter, did ya get our pay 'fore ya left?"

The reins dangled loosely from his hands, and he answered without turning to look at her. "Yep, got two dollars for our work and twenty-five cents for Owen carryin' water."

"We're goin' come back tomorrow, ain't we?" she asked anxiously. Her shoulders hunched over wearily.

"Minnie, I don't think ya'd best work any longer." Walter frowned into the dim twilight ahead of them.

"I can work. Won't hurt me." She pressed a rough, scarred hand on the seat to brace herself against the roughness of the wagon as it wobbled squeakily down the path. Her body seemed consumed in a big vat of pain. Maybe I'll lose this baby, she thought—and looked at her husband uneasily, afraid of her own bitterness.

They jogged along the rough, sagebrush-covered prairie. The three small boys were asleep in the bed of the wagon, and silence—not a friendly silence—gripped their parents.

Minnie raised a calloused, brown hand and supported her aching head upon its rough palm. She stared dully into the dusky twilight, seeing the vague sagebrush—dotted, unbroken land rolling gently before her. Land!—it's the cause of all my trouble. Walter's gotta have land—so, I work my fingers to the bone. She shot a glance at her husband, but he was staring straight ahead, a half-smile upon his face. Thinkin' about his precious land. Land—a silent tear rolled down her cheek. I'm only 20. I want to dance and have fun. She choked back threatening sobs. No—I have three babies and a no-good husband.

Clatter, clatter! Bump, bump!

They slowly made their way home.
Minnie felt a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes opened reluctantly.

"We're home. Ya get supper while I feed the team." Walter waved a hand indicating the bony, sad-eyed horses hitched to the wagon.

Minnie gathered her skirts up and climbed out of the wagon. Leaning over the side of the wagon bed, she shook Owen's shoulder. "Wake up, Owen. Bring Arvid and I'll take the baby." Owen clambered out of the wagon and his father swung Arvid over the side to the ground, handed the baby down to his wife, and shifted back to the driver's seat.

Sliding the baby over her hip, she grasped him firmly against her. Owen held the hand of toddling Arvid. Walking stiffly down the hard-packed sod steps, Minnie opened the door of the dugout. Striking her flint, she peered inside the doorway to make sure there were no snakes. She pushed the children ahead of her into the dugout.

Owen lit a precious candle while his mother put the sleeping Theron into his cradle. She gently drew his thumb out of his mouth and tucked the covers around him.

Handing a bucket to Owen, she sent him out to the well at the side of the dugout for water. After settling Arvid down on the bed in the corner, she moved swiftly about preparing a meal. She lighted a fire in the fireplace and set an iron pot of black-eyed peas over it to warm. Taking a pan of cornmeal mush, she cut it into thick slices and tossed it into a tin pie pan. Placing it over the coals, she took the bucket of water Owen handed her and poured a drink for Arvid.

The door opened and Walter came through the opening. His shoulders and head were bent to clear the door frame.

"Got the horses fed. Don't have much feed left."

He dipped his hands into a pan of water on a short stool.

"What'er we havin' tonight?"

Minnie viciously stabbed a slice of mush as she flipped it over to brown on the other side. "Same thing we had last night, night before that, and night before that—black-eyed peas and mush!"

"Now, Minnie," Walter flung an arm about her shoulders, "some day we'll have everything we want—white bread, good house." He moved over to the doorway and gazed out at the prairie as it shone under the tinge of the soft moonlight. "This is a land to grow with—to raise a family." His white teeth flashed
as he smiled at her bent over the fire. Softly he said, "One of these days, Minnie, you'll be the finest lady in all this country and I'll have—not acres of land—but sections." His eyes shone with a fanatic light, and he drew Owen to his side and pointed out the door. "Son, see that land?" The small boy's black head bobbed up and down, his eyes never leaving his father's face. "Land's what ya want, son. As long as ya got land yer okay."

Minnie walked across the room and faced her husband. Drawing Owen out of his father's arms, she placed both hands on his shoulders and stared down at him. He squirmed uncomfortably beneath her look.

"Mother, ya look so scarey."

She gripped his shoulders tighter. Her breath came in small gasps. "Owen, don't ever like this land. Don't listen to yer paw. It's bad, it'll hold ya here the rest of yer life, and ya'll never be free of it."

"But, Mother, I like this land."

Her hands dropped from his shoulders and hung limply at her side.

"Mother, don't look that way. Don't ya like our land?"

She looked down at her son, her eyes smouldering. Drawing a deep breath, she turned—looked out the door once more. "I hate this land!"

The eyes of her men followed her as she moved over to the fire and began dishing up the peas and tossing the browned, greasy mush onto a long, white dish.

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**Paean**

Mary Jo Overholt

To the sum of these
There is no more delight:

Sunlight in cold air—
Sunlight and the breathless rush
Of wings in a thousand hearts;
Clear, upsinging sky
And the soft shuffle of hurrying feet.

Warm hands, clasped,
Weave infinitely impossible memories
Of winged days, sky-swept nights.